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The Relationship Between Infant-Parent Attachment and the Ability to Tolerate Brief Separation at Six Years

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A crucial aspect of healthy functioning in children and adults is the ability to tolerate separation and aloneness. Clinicians working within a variety of theoretical frameworks have agreed that this ability is anchored in a history of confident knowledge that a sensitively responsive attachment figure will be available when needed (Bowlby, 1969, 1973; Freud and Burlingham, 1943; Mahler et al., 1975).

Bowlby has built his attachment theory around thinking of this sort. A relationship with an attachment figure who provides true physical and emotional security is seen as creating an inner sense of confidence in the child which he or she can call upon in situations in which that attachment figure is not actually present. Bowlby stated that "when an

individual is confident that an attachment figure will be available to him whenever he desires it, that person will be much less prone to either intense or chronic fear than will an individual who for any reason has no such confidence" (1973, p. 202).

Mahler's extensive observations also support the view that the child's ability to tolerate separation is dependent on the history of the mother-child relationship. She states that a relationship in which the mother is "consistently emotionally available" promotes "independence and autonomous functioning [by building] basic trust, confidence in mother and others, and sound secondary narcissism" (Mahler et al., 1975, p. 115).

And, of course, Winnicott dealt directly with this issue in his classic paper, "The Capacity to be Alone."

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Maturity and the capacity to be alone imply that the individual has had the chance through good-enough mothering to build up a belief in a benign environment. . . . Gradually the ego-supportive environment is introjected and built into the individual's personality, so that there comes about a capacity actually to be alone. Even so, theoretic-

cally, there is always someone present, someone who is equated ultimately and unconsciously with the mother. (1958, pp. 32-36)

These theoreticians not only predict healthy separation for children with confidence in a secure attachment figure but also difficulty with separation for children who lack this confidence. For example, Bowlby suggests that a child with "no confidence that his attachment figures will be accessible and responsive to him when he wants them . . . [adopts] a strategy of remaining in close proximity to them in order so far as possible to ensure that they will be available" (1973, p. 213). Mahler's observations led her to similar conclusions:

Maternal unavailability made the practicing and exploratory period of such children rather brief and subdued. Never certain of their mother's availability and thus always preoccupied with it, they found it difficult to invest libido in their surroundings and in their own functioning. After a brief spurt of practicing, they would return to their mother, with ever greater intensity and attempt by all possible means to engage her. (1975, p. 81)

Similarly, Anna Freud reported that "the child is all the more clinging, the more he has an inner conviction that separation will repeat itself" (Freud and Burlingham, 1944, p. 591). The home observations of Ainsworth and her colleagues (1978) provide data for this connection. Mother-infant interaction was observed for a period of approximately seventy-two hours over the first year of life in a sample of twenty-six infants. Infants who experienced insensitive or unresponsive mothering were less able than other infants to tolerate brief separations in the home by twelve months. These babies protested when their mothers left the room even in the course of daily activities.

In the late 1970s, Main and Weston undertook the first stages of study of the social development of a large number of white middle-class families residing in the Bay Area of California (the Berkeley Social Development Project). The early stages of the project included assessments of the quality of the infants' relationships to mother at twelve

months of age and to father at eighteen months. The assessment procedure used was the Ainsworth Strange Situation (Ainsworth and Wittig, 1969). The 20-minute procedure contains episodes during which the mother and a female "stranger" alternately leave and return to the baby who remains in a laboratory room containing an attractive pile of toys. There are two pre-separation episodes, two separations from mother, and two episodes of mother-baby reunion.

Ainsworth originally used this procedure at the end of her longitudinal Baltimore study; individual differences in infant response to the Ainsworth Strange Situation could be described as reflecting secure vs. insecure attachment. Infants who avoided mother on reunion were called insecure/avoidant; infants angry with mother on reunion were called insecure/resistant; and infants who sought proximity or interaction and seemed neither highly angry nor highly resistant were called securely attached. Examination of narrative records of the behavior of the original twenty-three infant-mother pairs in the home situation showed a strong relationship between security of attachment as assessed in the separation-reunion assessment and maternal sensitivity and responsiveness as observed in the home (Ainsworth et al., 1978).

Two recent studies have corroborated the positive relationship between "security of attachment," as assessed on the basis of the infant's response to this procedure, and maternal sensitivity and responsiveness to the signals and communications of the infant, as observed in the home environment (Belsky et al., in press; Grossmann and Grossman, in preparation). Laboratory studies have also shown a connection between secure attachment and maternal sensitivity (Main et al., 1979; Matas et al., 1978; Smith and Pederson, 1983).

Method

In 1982, the children who had been in the first group of babies seen in the Strange Situation at the Berkeley Social Development Pro-

ject were nearing six years of age. During the course of a multifaceted follow-up project, we had the opportunity to observe the relationship between early assessments of attachment and the ability to tolerate a brief separation at six years of age. The question addressed was: Are children who are secure with mother at twelve months of age as assessed through this laboratory technique more likely to tolerate a brief laboratory separation at six years of age than children judged insecure in the same setting?

The Ainsworth classification system is based primarily, but not entirely, on infant behavior during the two parent-baby reunion episodes. Securely attached babies show strong initial proximity-seeking, or at least interaction-seeking, on reunion. They tend actively to seek contact from the parent and to strive to maintain it. They cuddle in and find the parent to be a source of comfort. Once comforted, they are able to use the parent as a "secure base from which to explore" and return to play with the toys.

Insecurely attached babies show quite different patterns of reunion behavior. The largest number of insecurely attached babies are quite avoidant on reunion. They either turn away or actively move away from the parent. They play busily with the toys throughout much of the reunion, seemingly finding this of greater interest than the parent's return. If the parent calls them or invites them to approach, they tend to ignore her altogether. If picked up, they hold their bodies away and are quick to initiate release.

A second group of insecurely attached babies is classified as resistant and ambivalent. They might repeatedly alternate contact-seeking with struggles to be put down. Angry, resistant behaviors, such as throwing toys or hitting mother, characterize these babies. These babies are inconsolable, and contented play with the toys is delayed significantly if not altogether.

The secure, the insecure/avoidant, and the insecure/resistant categories make up the original Ainsworth classification system. In addition, Main and Weston (1981) reported that within the Berkeley sample some 14 percent of the babies did not fall into any of the categories

described by Ainsworth but seemed insecure in their attachment relationships. They called these babies insecure/unclassified. A large proportion of insecure/unclassified babies were deliberately included in the present follow-up study.

While several studies have shown significant stability of attachment classification to the *same* parent throughout the second year for white middle-class samples (Connell, 1976; Main and Weston, 1981; Waters, 1978), the quality of the infant's attachment relationship to one parent is independent of that to his or her other parent (Grossmann et al., 1981; Lamb, 1977; Main and Weston, 1981). Quality of attachment reflects the history of a specific relationship and thus characterizes not the child but the child's relation with a particular parent.

The present sample of thirty-seven children was selected from the larger sample assembled in the course of Main's previous research. All children came from intact families and white middle-class homes. Selection from the larger sample was deliberately used to provide a close to equal representation of children whose attachment relationships to mother at twelve months had been judged secure ($n = 14$), insecure/avoidant ($n = 10$), insecure/resistant ($n = 2$), and insecure/unclassified ($n = 11$). Each child was also assessed for security of attachment to father at eighteen months of age, but attachment to father (20 secure, 11 avoidant, 1 resistant, and 5 insecure/unclassified) was not a basis of sample selection. There were few insecure/resistant babies in the larger sample, and only three were available for this first follow-up—two with mother and one with father. There had been, of course, too many of the securely attached group to include them all in the first year of follow-up, and a random selection was made.

The children, now approaching six years, came to the laboratory with their parents for a series of videotaped assessments which lasted approximately two hours. The separation came after an extended familiarization period with the room and the adult playmate in the presence of the parents. Midway through the visit, following a period when the parents and child had been alone in the room eating a snack, there was a prearranged knock on the door.

This was a signal for the parents to give the child paper and colored pens, request that he draw a picture of anything he liked, and explain that they had to leave for a while but that the familiar adult playmate would join the child "in a minute."

We saw this separation as a nonthreatening situation for several reasons: (1) it lasted only one minute; (2) the children had been in the same room with their parents for almost an hour; and (3) these kindergarten-aged children had all faced longer daily separations.

The data consisted of approximately two minutes of videotape for each child—the minute during which the parents were in the room announcing and preparing for the separation and the minute during which the child was alone in the room. We combined these two minutes to form a measure of the child's reaction to the process of being left, and in particular to being briefly left *alone* by the parents. One coder, blind to earlier attachment classification, noted the presence or absence of disturbance related to the separation or to preparation for the separation for all children. In order to assess intercoder agreement, a second coder, also blind to earlier attachment classification, coded twenty-one randomly selected separations. The two coders agreed for twenty of the twenty-one children.

Results

As we expected, most children showed no disturbance. When their parents gave them the drawing materials, they moved easily to the new activity. Some responded with brief curiosity about the separation, that is, "Where are you going?" Most children said good-bye and eagerly turned to the attractive array of bright marking pens, then spent the minute alone focused on their new task, drawing with active involvement.

While most children showed no disturbance, children who had been securely attached to mother at twelve months were better able to tolerate this brief laboratory separation than were those who had been insecurely attached to mother. Only two of the fourteen securely

attached children (14 percent) seemed disturbed by the separation. One boy muttered angrily, "I want to go home," as his parents were leaving. This was the only child in the sample who showed direct anger. Another securely attached child was considered distressed because he stared vacantly around the room during the separation; he seemed unable to focus his attention.

On the other hand, eleven of the twenty-three children who had been insecurely attached to mother at twelve months showed a kind of anxious response to separation. For the previously insecure children, distress during the parents' leave-taking took the form of crying, clinging, agitated pleading with the parents not to leave, or requests to accompany the parents. One child burst into tears. One child said worriedly, "I hope I'm safe." One child became quite agitated, jumped up, and said, "Stay with me." One child followed his parents to the door, and pulling strongly on his father's arm, repeatedly pleaded with him not to leave. When his parents left, he stood in the middle of the room and stared at the door while whispering to himself and twisting his arms together. This child's distress was so great that the separation was terminated and the adult playmate returned after a few seconds.

Thus, there was a striking difference between the two attachment groups in their abilities to tolerate this brief laboratory separation. Only 14 percent of the children who had been secure with mother at twelve months showed distress on separation, and in one case the distress was qualitatively distinct from others (the direct expression, "I want to go home"). On the other hand, nearly half the children (48 percent) who had been classified as insecurely attached to mother at twelve months showed some difficulty with separation at six years of age. This included four of the ten children who had been insecure/avoidant with mother at twelve months,—children who in infancy had shown little or no distress upon separation. A chi-square test showed a significant difference between children who had been securely attached to mother as babies and children who had been insecurely attached ($\chi^2(1) = 4.30, p < .05$). There was no relationship between early security of attachment to

father and separation behavior. Seven of the twenty babies securely attached to father (35 percent) and six of the seventeen babies insecurely attached to father (35 percent) showed disturbance related to separation ($\chi^2(1) = .09$, ns.). There were no sex differences.

We used the Ainsworth Strange Situation procedure to represent individual differences in experiences of ready accessibility and responsiveness of mother during the first year of life. To the extent that this procedure accurately represents such early experience, our

findings suggest that ready accessibility does not result in heightened sensitivity to separation and the need for the parent to stay with the child. Rather, it seems that this accessibility provides the child with a basic trust that enables tolerance of separation at five years, at least in our brief laboratory setting. Our findings lend support to the assertion that "an unthinking confidence in the unfailing accessibility and support of attachment figures is the bedrock on which stable and self-reliant personality is built" (Bowlby, 1973, p. 322).

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